

THE MEDITATIONS OF AMIEL

A MAN OF SHADOWS.

AMIEL'S JOURNAL.—The Journal in Time of Henry Peacock will be published with an introduction and notes by Mrs. Humphrey Ward. With a portrait. Two volumes. Pp. xvi, 319; 402. Macmillan & Co.

The writings of Amiel are the literary apothecaries of a character incapable of decision. Of the beauty of his posthumous records, of his singular acuteness as a critic of his own mental and spiritual confusion, much has been said. But there is occasion for a work from the platform of common sense, a platform on which neither Amiel nor it may be added his admirers have wasted much of their time. The self-reproach of his closest friend, Edmond Scherer, was responsible for some of the extraordinary things that have been said about him. All through the period of intercourse between the two men Scherer took the attitude of a somewhat impatient monitor, urging Amiel for his own credit to do something in a literary way to prove his learning by his works. Whenever Amiel published some small volume of verse he seems to have asked himself not without an accent of terror, "What will Scherer think of this?" At the same time he discounted possible censure by his self-depreciation. But the real work of Amiel's life, his journal, was unknown to Scherer, or went unnoticed.

When the end came and the thousands of pages of this life record came under Scherer's eye he was struck with something like remorse. He felt that he had been unjust and that he should have given Scherer more censure. But, though he was face to face with the voluminous manuscript which Amiel had left at his death, he still persisted in presenting the view, which others also adopted, that through some defect of organization his friend had in life neglected the essay-writing, book-making or what not which his natural parts, his scholarship and his position as a professor made incumbent upon him. The work which the journal must have cost day by day seemed to count for nothing. It is true that many a man could have kept a journal and lectured to colleges and written innumerable books, but it is certain that the journal would have been, from the literary point of view, no such work as Amiel's. But Amiel in his lifetime took much the same view of himself as Scherer did. The careful and finished little pieces in his diary were looked upon as the mere apology of an idler for not working at some more serious business. As a matter of fact, both Scherer and Amiel, like other human beings, spelled "duty" as if it were pronounced "inclination"; and Amiel, in his weakness and indecision, took the inclinations of his vigorous, didactic friend as a definition of the duty which he himself neglected. Nothing could be stranger than his failure to penetrate this ambiguity unless it be the compassion that has been expended on him since his death.

One point that comes out—if not on the first reading, certainly on repeated perusal of his journal, whether in French or English—is that Amiel had no original message to the world. He lacked the power of initiative. In philosophy he takes the color of the last book he has read. Acutely as he criticized, he was dependent on others for material to work upon. Hardly an opinion can be found in any part of his work which cannot be flatly contradicted by some bit of equally careful composition on another page. He was by turns a disciple of Hegel, of Schopenhauer, of Krause, of Schleiermacher—indeed, of all who wrote with skill, with learning or with style. A failure in style was more loathsome to him than a defect in subject matter. He hated dry books. He demanded wine where some writers give only their unstrained, untempered must. But the man who writes about with every wind of doctrine can never be a teacher of the race. He may be able to point out the limitations of those whom he follows. Better still, he may be able to show in the story of his own life a vivid picture of changes undergone by a contemplative soul under varied influences. This Amiel certainly did. His range of perception was very wide; his capacity of putting the impression of a day's reading, for example, into a single sentence was remarkable. As long as the reader seeks only such vivid pictures of mental states, he must gaze here with delight. But when he asks what strength he has gained, what evolution in him has been strengthened, what erratic thought Amiel's example or precept has enabled him to cast in the answer is none. He has had, as he reads, fugitive glimpses of his own defects, he has observed innumerable occasions where he could not sympathize with the melancholy musings of Amiel, but he rises with a vague, contradictory, shadowy impression of all these things and of the author himself. The offerer he reads the most slowly, the Genevan dreamer becomes a man of flesh and blood feels in such a case much Odysseus did when he tried to embrace a ghost and found that he could not touch it, that it wavered out of his grasp like the viewless air itself.

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